

COMPARISON **TVR T350 T v ALPINA ROADSTER S**

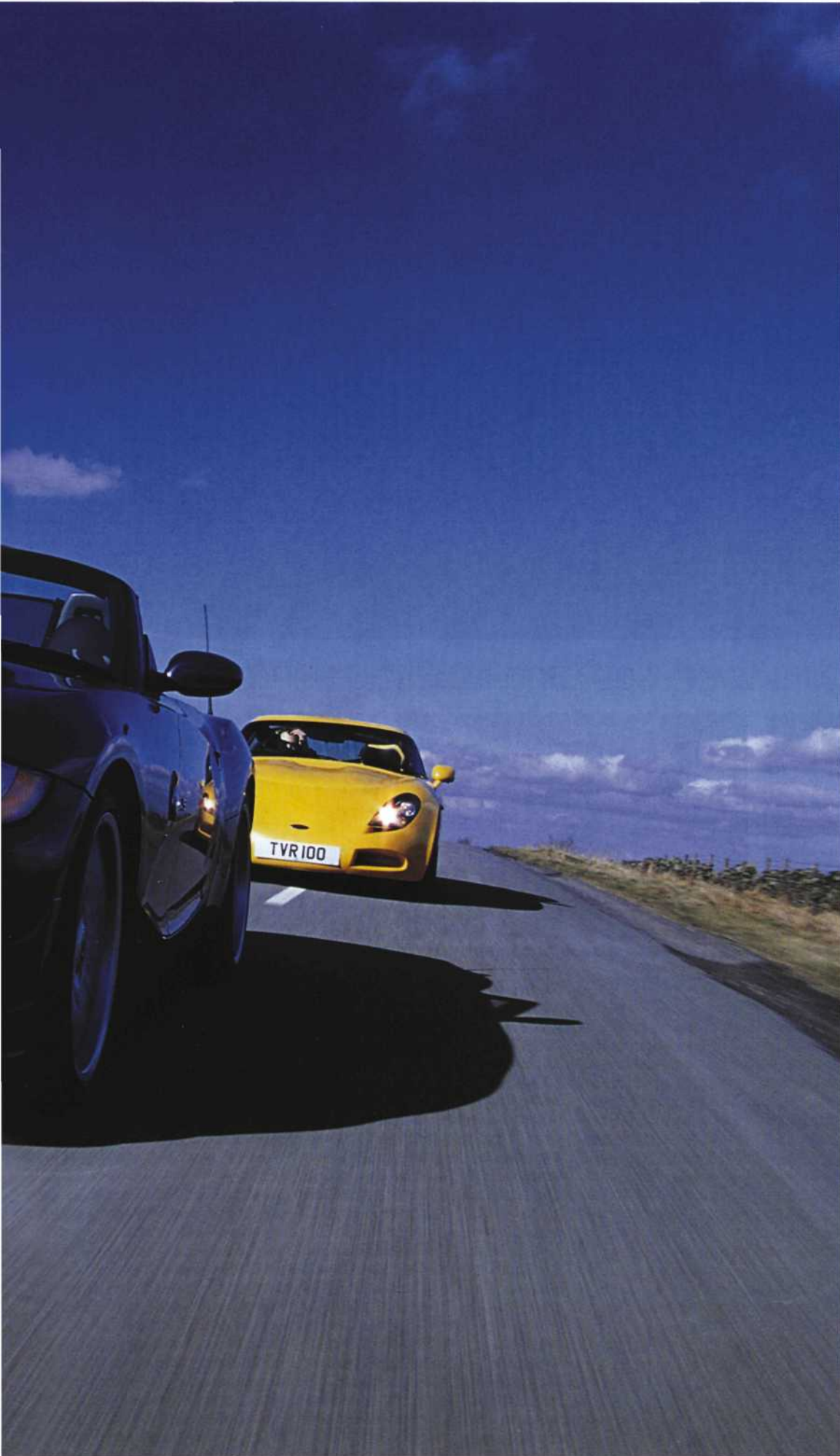
Twin Freaks

The TVR T350 T looks – and goes – bananas. The Alpina Roadster S is its Teutonic equivalent. Andrew Frankel decides which is the top banana

PHOTOGRAPHY DAVID SHEPHERD



Alpina's low front splitter gives it real presence; 350 prettiest TVR in years



The BBC is shortly to reveal the identity of Britain's best situation comedy, as voted for by the public from a shortlist drawn from all the sitcoms ever to grace the small screen. Leaving aside the curious fact that all 10 finalists just happen to be the provenance of the embattled corporation, I find my loyalties split between *Yes*, *Minister* and *Porridge*. Just how do you choose between Sir Humphrey Appleby and Norman Stanley Fletcher?

This may seem like an odd way to introduce a test of two 300bhp-plus sports cars but, as the Alpina Roadster S and TVR T350 T hammered across the Peak District last week, it was to this very quandary that I found my mind constantly being diverted. What is the right medium for such cars? Is unctuous smoothness the way forward when there's 40 grand at stake or should the more visceral, smack-in-the-chops approach - so clearly the right approach at lower price points - continue to show the way here? That is the fundamental choice that underpins all you'll read here and, believe me, it's not as simple as it looks.

For now though, consider what they have in common. Both use normally aspirated, straight-six, twin-cam, 24-valve motors of around 3.5 litres and direct their power to the rear wheels alone. In the 3.4-litre BMW's case, that output is 300bhp, backed by 267lb ft of torque, all of which is fed through a close-ratio six-speed 'box. The 350's motor is marginally larger at 3.6 litres and considerably more powerful - 350bhp and 290lb ft of torque bellowing pugnaciously from beneath its bonnet, but it has only five gears.

In all other respects, both stick strictly to their respective marque's form books. Like its BMW Z4 host, the Alpina uses strut-type front suspension and a multi-link rear axle, while the TVR - like every other I've driven - uses double wishbones at each corner. Similarly predictable is the TVR's lightweight plastic body, helping to achieve a kerbweight of only 1135kg. By conventional standards, the 1320kg steel and aluminium Roadster S is pretty slim-hipped, too, but at nearly 200kg more than the TVR and with a 50bhp deficit, it seemed unlikely even to stay in touch.

Then again (and I've had to double-check the figures because I still can't quite believe them) it's the Alpina that's actually markedly the cheaper of the two. For £38,000 on the road, it comes sumptuously equipped with leather upholstery, air conditioning and electric, heated seats. The days of the truly affordable TVR are long gone and it asks £40,500 for a T350T, rising quickly to £44,710, even if you just want leather and air-con. Of the anti-lock, traction and stability control and multiple airbags that come as standard on the Alpina there is, of course, no sign.

The BMW also has a fully electric hood; the TVR's double-bubble targa roof panels may be carbonfibre, but the brackets that hold them in place •

TVR has more straight-line urge on paper, but tall gears don't help its case



Get the TVR into its sweet spot and its savage urge is addictive



Targa roof does the T350 T no stylistic favours; TVR six has monster torque, but not until 4000rpm; cabin is, er, distinctive. And very roomy

smack of an amateurism TVR should have lost long ago. They look like they were sourced from B&Q and let in so much wind noise that, above 90mph, conversation is best conducted by sign language. It is as well there are so many lovely touches, like the drilled rear hatch hinges and tactile, attractive switchgear to take your mind off such things.

The TVR's case is also helped by it being quite the most beautiful car to emerge from Blackpool since the Griffith over a decade ago; in that alone it possesses a desirability to which its mechanically similar, but convertible sister, the Tamora, cannot hope to aspire. The targa panels look like afterthoughts, but are not enough to spoil the overall form of the car. However, the Alpina addenda have also worked wonders for the Z4's shape. I'm no great fan of the rear spoiler, but the front splitter has not only given the Z4 terrific purpose, it also leads the eye away from the host car's fussy and contrived detailing.

To work. Everything you have read so

far suggests the TVR is about to flatten the Alpina - how can a power-to-weight ratio of 308bhp per tonne compared to 227bhp per tonne lead to any other result? In fact, all these statistics prove is that you can prove anything with statistics. Yes, the TVR is ultimately the quicker car but, out there in the real world, its advantage is much less than you'd suspect. TVR's statistics say it will do 60mph in 4.4sec while Alpina claims 5.1sec for the Roadster S, but with five tall ratios (a close-ratio gearbox is a further £1530), this T350T would get there in first gear while the Alpina, with more closely stacked gears, needs two.

More significant is that while the Alpina also has a torque deficit over the T350 T, it does at least provide 90 per cent of it from as little as 2500rpm. By contrast, the TVR motor saves its best work for the far side of 5000rpm, compounding the problem of its tall gears: it indicated over 90mph in second gear before the change-up lights started flashing. This meant that, at the exit of

your typical, second-gear roundabout, it was the Alpina that would invariably go streaking off to the horizon while the TVR driver waited for its engine to come to the boil.

Once on song, both have magnificent engines. Get the TVR into its sweet spot and its savage urge, combined with thrash-metal soundtrack, can be somewhat addictive - you find yourself hopping to be held up just so you can drop a couple of gears and hear it all again. The Alpina is quieter, but no less compelling. Its engine is not based on any used by BMW today, but on the iron block of the original 1992 E36 M3, and it sings a hauntingly beautiful song. Its great flexibility means it matters a lot less which gear you're in while ultimately still being able to push the Alpina through the air at serious speeds - 172mph, if you believe the bumf. TVR claims 'over 175mph' for the 350 which, if you can stand the noise, would appear eminently achievable, too.

But while the TVR's straight-line

advantage is less than expected, you should not expect the Alpina to hold all the cards in the corners. Dynamically, Alpina's suspension modifications mean the Roadster S improves only slightly on the already impressive standards of the Z4 - it rides only tolerably well, while its steering lacks the feel so prevalent in, say, a Porsche Boxster S. Where it excels is in the provision of grip and its manners once the supply has been exhausted. On our day together the roads were salt-strewn and the air temperature near freezing, but never did it feel anything other than totally on top of the situation. It understeers a little, but this can easily be dialled out with the right foot, especially if the electronics have been turned off.

But, somewhat staggeringly, the TVR rides better than the Alpina and, despite narrower tyres, grips the tarmac at least as well. Across seriously undulating Peak District roads it lacks the last degree of the Alpina's composure but, once you have grown used to the



TVR feels edgier, but swifter than Alpina when roads get twisty

■ The Alpina's 3.4-litre straight six sings a hauntingly beautiful song



BMW switchgear classy, but not as appealing as TVR's; iron-block six based on lump from E36 M3; watch out Boxster S, Roadster S has your number...

overly-direct steering and its equally disappointing levels of feel, it's a car you can hustle with great vigour, even if its steadfast refusal to slide anywhere other than at the rear does not impart the same sense of quiet confidence that's the hallmark of Alpina progress.

The Alpina also stumbles in some areas you might not expect relative to the TVR. There's a lot less room inside both for passengers and their luggage and, while its BMW parts-bin switchgear looks fine in isolation, there's no doubting that the unique approach to cabin design offered by TVR produces a more memorable interior and the greater sense of occasion.

So which is it to be - Sir Humphrey or Fletch? A dynamically optimised vehicular conveyance advantageously configured for the expeditious and convivial provision of velocitous advancement, or a naffin' fast car? In my heart I'm instinctively a greater fan of the direct approach to such cars, as espoused so well by the 350. I can cope

without all the safety gear (until I crash) and love its looks, epic performance and heart-on-sleeve approach to life. But whether I would choose to spend over £40k on such a car and then live with it is another matter: the dreadful levels of cabin noise at a decent cruising speed kill its long-distance potential (despite its canvas top, the Alpina is massively more refined) and, for this money, even a TVR should be better equipped. I expect the solid-roofed T350 C would be a far better bet.

So victory, then, to the sophisticate that is the Roadster S. In ideal conditions it's a touch less fun than the 350 T, but it's closer than the raw data would ever suggest, close enough, indeed, for its everyday appeal to more than make up the difference. Quicker and better looking than the Boxster S against which it is so clearly pitched and priced and with the exclusivity of the Alpina brand behind it, I'd expect it to be capable of claiming not just this TVR's scalp, but possibly the Porsche's, too. •

FACT FILE	ALPINA ROADSTER S	TVR T350 T
Price	£38,900	£40,500
On sale in UK	Now	Now
0-60mph	5.1sec	4.4sec
0-100mph	12.0sec	9.5sec
Top speed (claimed)	172mph	175mph-plus
ENGINE		
Layout	Straight six, 3346cc	Straight six, 3605cc
Power	300bhp/6300rpm	350bhp/7200rpm
Torque	267lb ft/4800rpm	290lb ft/5500rpm
Installation	Longitudinal, front, rwd	Longitudinal, front, rwd
GEARBOX	6-speed manual	5-speed manual
CHASSIS		
Suspension (t/r)	MacPherson struts/multi-link, anti-roll bar	Double wishbones/double wishbones
Steering	Rack and pinion, power assisted, 3.2 turns	Rack and pinion, power assisted, 3.0 turns
Brakes (t/r)	300/294mm ventilated discs	304/282mm ventilated discs
Anti-lock	Standard	Not available
Wheels (t/r)	8.5J x 19/9.5J x 19, alloy	8.5Jx18, alloy
Tyres (t,r)	235/35 R19, 265/30 R19	225/50 ZR18
VERDICT	Sophisticated and rapid, with easily accessible performance.	Raucous and a riot to drive, but a bit rough for £40k.